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SERMON

PREACHED AT THE FUNERAL SERVICES

OF

MARSHALL S. BIDWELL,

BY THE

REV. ROBERT RUSSELL BOOTH, D. D.



The Funeral Services of MARSHALL S. BIDWELL were held in the Presbyterian Church, on University Place, New York, October 27th, 1872, taking the place of the usual afternoon service.

The Thirty-ninth and Ninetieth Psalms were chanted. The first ten verses of the Fifth Chapter of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, and the latter part of the Seventh Chapter of the Revelation, were read by the Pastor.

The following Hymns were sung :

There is a house not made with hands,
Eternal and on high :
And here my spirit waiting stands,
Till God shall bid it fly.

Shortly this prison of my clay
Must be dissolved and fall :
Then, O my soul, with joy obey
Thy heavenly Father's call.

We walk by faith of joys to come ;
Faith lives upon his word ;
But while the body is our home,
We're absent from the Lord.

'Tis pleasant to believe thy grace,
But we had rather see ;
We would be absent from the flesh,
And present, Lord, with thee.

—WATTS.

Through every age, Eternal God !
Thou art our rest, our safe abode ;
High was thy throne, ere heaven was made,
Or earth, thy humble footstool, laid.

But man, weak man, is born to die,
Made up of guilt and vanity ;
Thy dreadful sentence, Lord ! was just—
"Return, ye sinners ! to your dust !"

Death, like an overflowing stream,
Sweeps us away ; our life's a dream ;
An empty tale ; a morning flower,
Cut down and withered in an hour.

Teach us, O Lord ! how frail is man ;
And kindly lengthen out our span,
Till a wise care of piety
Fit us to die and dwell with thee.

—WATTS.

TEXT: PSALM 37, VERSE 37.

“Mark the perfect man and behold the upright,
for the end of that man is peace.”

SERMON.

In a peculiar sense it is the glory of the Gospel, that it manifests its power in renewing, sanctifying and refining character. In common with all other systems which embody truth, Christianity presents its theoretic principles, which, in themselves, are sound and worthy of all admiration. But, in connection with these theories of virtue and religion which stand before us in the Bible, it is always and emphatically urged upon us, that they can be revealed in their true beauty and power only when they have entered into real life, and have brought forth fruits of uprightness and righteousness before the eyes of men. Hence, it is not to the abstract or ideal graces which are delineated on its pages, that the word of God directs attention, when it invites us to take knowledge of the blessed influence of true religion, but to the living men who, in their walk

ight,

with God, have revealed those graces and have adorned that doctrine by a holy conversation. In a large degree, the Bible makes its impress on the world by thus delineating character. It urges those who would attain eternal life to "be followers of them, who, through faith and patience, have inherited the promises." It sustains us as we seek to run the Christian race, by the experience and example of that long life of worthies, "who obtained a good report and died in faith, confessing that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth." It fastens our attention on good men everywhere, both in their living and in their dying, as it bids us "mark the perfect man and behold the upright, for the end of that man is peace."

It is this peculiarity of the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour, especially as it is embodied in the passage which I have chosen as the text—to which I would direct attention now; to the intent that, in gaining a just conception of the character which is therein described, and by contemplating its peaceful exit from the world, we may, this day, be led to an increase of earnestness in "pressing toward the mark for the prize of our high calling."

With this end in view let us seek to gain—

FIRST—A clear view of the Christian conception of the perfect and the upright man ; and at the outset it is obvious that the expression is one which needs some explanation. If, by the terms “perfect” and “upright,” in the text, we are to understand absolute freedom from sin or fault, and entire agreement with the law of God, we must, of course, confess that such perfection and uprightness are not found on earth. It is the clear and oft-repeated testimony of the Holy Scriptures that the believer is only sanctified in part, and “has not yet attained, neither is already perfect.” Among the saints, whose lives and virtues are depicted here, not one presents himself without some taint of our corrupted nature, without some fault that mars the beauty of his character. And yet, it is equally certain that under some limitations, these very qualities are often predicated of God’s faithful servants. Hundreds of passages might be quoted from the Old Testament and the New, in which these terms “perfect” and “upright” are applied to the character which the grace of God produces in its subjects. Therefore it is evident that the true reference of such expressions must be to the symmetry, the

truthfulness, the profound reality of one's piety, rather than to his absolute freedom from sin and fault.

The idea of the life thus held up for our consideration, is that of a possession of the essential principles of Christian righteousness, in conscious integrity of purpose, and in progressive development. He who can be thus commended, is one who lives by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the foundation of his character. He has no disposition to depend on his own merits or attainments. He has no plea of righteousness to offer, save by his appropriation of the Redeemer's perfect work for sinners. From first to last, in this relation, his hopes depend on Christ, "who of God is made unto us, wisdom and righteousness, sanctification and redemption."

But further, with this simplicity of faith, there is combined in such a character, a full and hearty purpose to be governed by Christ's laws and spirit, as well as saved by His grace, and thus to the "perfection" which belongs to him in his relations to the law of God, through his dependence on the righteousness of Christ, he adds the "uprightness" which walks before the world, in the conscientious discharge of every duty and in

the constant effort to adorn the Gospel in all things. The purpose to be practically faithful to all the obligations of his calling in Christ Jesus, is, in fact, the dividing line which separates "the perfect and the upright man" from Christians of the average stamp. He cherishes an earnest spirit and pursues a holy and consistent course. Meet him where you may, you see in him the same devout and conscientious character. His religion penetrates his life, and his life is the bright and fair exponent of his religion. Though often failing to keep his own heart separate from evil, it is his constant aim to walk with God in true obedience all the day and everywhere. Thus he lives as "ever in his great task-master's eye," and having the testimony of a good conscience, that "in simplicity and godly sincerity he has his conversation in the world."

And further, to this simple dependence and true obedience of faith there is joined in the character of the perfect and the upright man a constant growth towards the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. Whatever be the point he starts from in this development of character, he is always pressing forwards. No one is more willing than he to acknowledge that he

has not reached the point of real perfection. In his last experience he is conscious that he sees but through a glass darkly. Much as he may know about the love of God in Jesus Christ his Lord, he is well aware that there is a breadth and length, and depth and height which passes knowledge. Hence he is not content with any past attainments. The heights to be surmounted in the future restrain him from any undue exultation over the advances which he has already made. Though he may have outstripped many of his fellow-pilgrims in the way to Zion; he will be humble in his estimate of his achievements, and will join with the Apostle in "forgetting the things which are behind, and reaching forth to those which are before." Thus he presses "towards the mark for the prize of his high calling of God in Christ Jesus." This purpose saves him from spiritual pride which would otherwise become a serious blemish in the beauty of his life. The sense of being always in pursuit of higher excellencies, of desiring closer conformity to the pure and perfect Saviour, and of aspiring heavenward for his final consummation in purity and joy, imparts a delightful symmetry to such a character. Its graces are harmonious. It brings

forth leaf and flower and fruit. And though it may be true that in this or that respect, it will seem faulty or imperfect ; yet, as a whole, it will attract and charm us, as we see it rooted deeply in the grace of God, and lifting up its ever-fruitful branches towards the skies.

Taking into our view the elements of such a character, as they have now been mentioned ; namely, faith, faithfulness and heavenly aspiration, we realize that it is worthy to be held up before the world for notice and for imitation. "Mark the perfect man and behold the upright." Such men there are within the common range of observation. We have seen them amid the toils and trials of the common lot, rising high above the ordinary level of Christian attainment, shining as lights in the world and holding forth the word of life. And such men are the peculiar products of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Nature does not originate them. No degree of intellectual culture can produce them. No other religion than that of Jesus has ever availed to raise this lost humanity of ours to such a height, and, as the peculiar product of the Gospel, they are to be observed, appreciated, imitated. Unconscious as they themselves may be of their own attract-

iveness, going in and out before their fellow men, having, like Moses, a radiance in their faces though they know it not ; and much as it would grieve them to be identified with any other aim than to do their daily duty simply and sincerely in the fear of God ; still I say, to mark these men of perfect upright character is our instructive impulse, and to follow them in their bright course to Heaven is a dictate of the highest wisdom. We need such illustrations of the power of grace, and in contemplating and admiring them, we are attracted from the vanities of life to the realities of character and usefulness and peace which the Gospel brings within the reach of all. Therefore we are exhorted by the Psalmist to "mark the perfect man and to behold the upright," to the end that we ourselves may also "grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ," who alone can raise us to this purity and grace of life.

SECOND.—But we come now to a consideration of the concluding part of this description, which presents the consummation which awaits this character in the solemn hour when "this mortal shall put on immortality." "The end of that man is peace." It seems natural to anticipate

that this should be the issue of a life so pure and true. If we had never witnessed the bright sunset hour of such a career, we should, nevertheless, expect that, after such a preparation, it would be peace to die. With Christ as the companion of the earthly pilgrimage, with duty kept in view from day to day, with Heaven desired and longed for as the scene of deliverance from sin and of immediate communion with God—how could there be any other than a tranquil exit from the world! To such a character, death is the one thing which is wanting for the consummation of its beauty, for the satisfaction of its longings, for the full fruition of its fondest hopes. "The sting of death is sin;" but when sin is no longer master in the soul, Death comes as a deliverer. What is there in it, under this condition, which can overwhelm the soul? It is but a falling asleep at evening to awake in the likeness of Christ. It is but putting off "the earthly house of this tabernacle" to enter into "a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the Heavens." The door of entrance may be low and narrow, the passage damp and dark, which conduct one from the present world, but, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, they end in "the rest that remaineth

for the people of God." Thus it is that in approaching Death the man whose thoughts have been habitually conversant with all that it implies for the people of God, and who has a conscious interest in the Redeemer's work of grace, can rise above all natural apprehensions and think of his departure as a going home to be " forever with the Lord." And as it is with such an one in the anticipation of this final hour, so it is in the actual experience which sunders soul and body, and ushers the immortal part into its endless home. Many and varied are the outward form of this departure. Sometimes in mortal anguish, which, like a tempest, shakes down the earthly tabernacle ; sometimes in physical unconsciousness of the last act of dissolution ; sometimes by a sharp and sudden stroke, which in an unexpected moment cuts off the thread of life ; and sometimes by a soft and gentle motion which bears the spirit homeward, as a vessel rounds the headland of her long desired haven. But amid all variations in the method of departure, the essential thing is that the issue of the change is " peace." " For" so says the Apostle, " shall an abundant entrance be ministered unto you, into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." On this point,

my friends, there need be no misgivings. Ultimate failure in the case of one whose character is such as has been here described, is utterly impossible. The character decides the destiny, and peace is the bright ideal of that higher, better life into which such enter when they rest from their labors.

Have we not sometimes had a glimpse of the reality which greets them, at the moment when the pain and weariness and waste of life seemed to vanish, and there fell on their faces a solemn, peaceful beauty as they settled into the stillness of the last sleep? Yes, and often the parting hour seems lightened by a radiance that streams down from the upper sanctuary to greet the ascending spirit, and rests upon the peaceful face, as a sign and prophecy of the glory of the life to come. But, on the other side, the "peace" of which we dream and sing on earth, is deep and full. They are at home in the Father's house. They walk on the banks of the river. They rest from their labors and their works do follow them. They see the face of God and join with saints and angels in the great anthem of Redemption. They worship and they work in a higher and more blissful

range of being, than it hath "entered into the heart of man to conceive."

"They die in Jesus and are blessed ;
How soft their slumbers are ;
From suffering and from sin released
And every mortal care.

"Far from a world of toil and strife
They're present with the Lord ;
The labors of this mortal life
End with a large reward."

"Mark the perfect man and behold the upright, for the end of that man is peace." My brethren ! such lives and such deaths are not rare occurrences. I have not drawn a fancy sketch or suffered imagination to enlarge upon the simple truth. We see them living round us, in piety and usefulness. Oh ! that we might seek of God the grace to lead us in their footsteps ! We see them dying, in the peace of God, and as we look, our hearts lift up the cry of one of old, "Let me die the death of the righteous and let my last end be like his."

And now my brethren ! it is appropriate for us to turn from these thoughts upon the general theme of holy living and happy dying, to the special illustration of their truth, which is presented to us by that most sudden and afflictive

stroke of God's Providence which has brought this mourning company together here to-day.

It has pleased Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, to remove from among us one, of whom it may be said, with the simplicity of truth, that in a good degree he has illustrated the character I have described ; and, having finished his course, has entered upon the higher, holier life of perfect peace in Heaven. It is the impulse of friendship in such an hour, to eulogize the dead ; but I am sure that our departed friend would have repelled the utterance of any fulsome words concerning him ; indeed, of any words other than those of tender, heartfelt appreciation of his worth. I speak, then, further, only to remind you of the traits and qualities which made him so venerable and so dear while he lived, and which are now invested with the sanctity of death. I speak, I am confident, not for myself alone—though I might claim a special right to testify to the rare worth and helpfulness of one who was to me, for many years, the kindest and most considerate of friends—but in behalf of the hundreds who, in the different relations of his long and useful life, esteemed him, confided in him, were instructed

by him, and regarded him with the highest reverence.

It is no common bereavement which has happened to us in the death of such a man. Mr. Bidwell was a singular illustration of the highest intellectual and spiritual excellencies. His attainments were varied and thorough and comprehensive. In all the years during which he has been prominently active, first and elsewhere in affairs of State, and afterwards here, in the practice of his profession, he has been a man of mark, his opinions have had power with men, his influence has been felt far and wide. Nature endowed him generously with intellectual powers, and these he cultivated to a high degree by the most careful study, not only of the principles and precedents of jurisprudence, but also of all subjects which are worthy of the interest of educated minds. His reading covered all departments of literary and religious interest, and all he read was thoroughly digested. It seems almost superfluous to say that he was a man of strict integrity. His honest, upright spirit would tolerate no deviation from the right. He walked in his integrity before the world, faithful to every trust, inflexible in the defense of what he thought to be

the righteous cause ; and yet, joined to this inflexibility of moral purpose, there was in him a kindness and grace of heart which made him tolerant and courteous toward men of different views, forbearing and forgiving in the experience of injuries, and always hopeful of the future. Those who knew him best will long appreciate the charm which pervaded his social intercourse, the vivacity and sprightliness of his conversation, the large resources of his ever ready memory, and the unfailing sympathy which prompted him to weep with those who weep, and to rejoice with those who rejoice.

I speak of his religious character with a peculiar satisfaction. It was penetrated with the sweetest spirit of the Gospel. Few men were more conversant than he with the realities of grace and truth, which are presented to our faith in the religion of the Bible. It might be truly said of him, that " his delight was in the law of the Lord, and in His law did he meditate day and night."

The deepest, clearest convictions of his soul were centered on the truths which Christianity reveals. He investigated them for himself, in the light of all objections, with those strong

powers of reasoning which pervaded all the operations of his mind. He was thoroughly persuaded of the truth as it is in Jesus, and his heart rested sincerely and unchangeably on the Redeemer as his Advocate and ever-present Friend. His religious convictions controlled his daily life. He took great delight in being helpful to his fellow-men. All through his course and to the last day of his stay on earth, he was engaged in doing good as he had opportunity. Some forms of Christian effort which others are engaged in he did not undertake, but when he thought he could be useful he never hesitated to contribute his best endeavors. One of his characteristic traits was his peculiar tenderness towards all who were in trouble. He was wont to visit the widows and the fatherless in their affliction, and in that refined and noble courtesy of friendship, which unites with the afflicted in paying the last tribute to the dead, I have known none more constant, more eminent than he. His faith in the power of prayer was a striking trait in his religious life—he believed in a prayer-hearing and a prayer-answering God. Prayer was to him the highest privilege and the most constant consolation.

He held habitual communion with things unseen and eternal. His conversation truly was in Heaven, and he was ever looking forward to the end of life with quiet, happy expectation. Hence sudden death, which is a dread to many, was not to him a repulsive thought. As he was always ready to depart, he did not fear being called away whenever God so pleased. It was his habit to repeat from time to time, when his mind turned toward this theme, these simple lines :

“ When faith and patience, hope and love,
Have made me meet for Heaven above,
How blest the privilege to rise,
Snatched in a moment to the skies.
Unconscious to resign the breath,
Nor taste the bitterness of death ;
Such be my lot, Lord ! if it please
To die in silence, and at ease.
When Thou dost find that I'm prepared,
Oh, seize me quick to Thy reward.”

And so it was ordained for him. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye—by a stroke than which none ever fell on man more suddenly, more gently—he passed from the presence of his associates, from the anxieties and interests of earth, to take his place among the saints in glory everlasting. He walked with God, in a long and happy life, and he was not, for God took him.

We part to-day, my friends, with what was visible and mortal of our friend and father, but the memory of the just is blessed ; and we shall long cling to the remembrance of a life so good and fair, and draw from it an inspiration to quicken us in our discharge of duty and in our course to Heaven.

